Vegan diet: How to get the nutrients you need

Nutritional Outlook

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Adopting a vegan diet becomes easier each year as food producers catch up to meet growing demand for plant-based products. Veganism is rising in the United States. In the U.S. today, 6% of consumers say they are vegans. This a six-fold (500%) increase from the just 1% of consumers who said they were vegans in 2014.

Veganism to Fight Climate Change and Food Waste

In the age of environmental and climate-change struggles, dietary modifications are becoming an increasingly important solution. According to Climate Change 2022: Mitigation of Climate Change, a report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, shifting from eating meat to eating a plant-based diet is a great way to save the planet and fight climate change. Compared to current dietary patterns in most industrialized countries, studies show that switching to plant-based diets rich in pulses, nuts, fruits, and vegetables could reduce greenhouse gas emissions dramatically.

Then there's soil degradation, which changes what we can grow and how nutritious our food is. Agribusiness and food processes can be made climate-resilient in several ways. Improving soil quality is one intervention. Carbon can be stored in healthy soil, reducing emissions. It also increases crop productivity and resilience to droughts and floods. Another example is choosing crop varieties with high nutrition and resilience to extreme weather and climate. In addition to varying what we eat, diversification could replace nutrient-poor staples.

Finally, we can reduce hunger and conserve water and energy by cutting food loss and waste. Food waste currently accounts for 17% of all food produced worldwide.

How Diet Influences Farming

Most people's diets dictate how farmers, ranchers, and food producers grow, change, and adapt their products. With integrated farming, farmers can produce food, energy, fiber, timber, and non-timber forest products, which grow in cycles or in tandem.

Brazilian researchers have been studying how integrated farming systems can make farms more resilient on all fronts, including by improving the local microclimate by reducing local temperatures; increasing precipitation; increasing water availability; reducing the impact of extreme weather events on crops, livestock, and other products; reducing soil erosion; improving productivity; and providing additional socioeconomic benefits by increasing the number of products farmers can produce for subsistence or to sell.

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How Plant-Based Diets Influence the Market

Beyond Meat and other plant-based burgers represent rapid change in the fast food industry. Fast food chains offer everything from Impossible Whoppers to McPlants as plant-based products increase in popularity. Grocery stores are also constantly looking for more plant-based products to offer shoppers due to high demand.

It's not just vegetarians and vegans trying plant-based meat substitutes, either. Meat-eaters are, too. Even if you're not fully sold on going vegan, you can opt for Meatless Mondays to simply cut back on animal products to support the environment and improve your health.

Some consumers are also choosing plant-based foods as these products begin to rival the taste and cost of meat. A survey by Piplsay surveyed 30,700 people and found that 54% of fast food customers who'd heard about plant-based meat substitutes had eaten them, and 72% of those respondents were meat eaters.

Dietary Guidelines for Vegetarians and Vegans for Long-Term Health

Even as the plant-based diet skyrockets, there are inevitable, long-term challenge to balancing the nutrients you need when remaining on a vegetarian or vegan diet. Concerns include deficiencies in vitamin B12, protein, and iron, nutrients people have long relied on animal-based products to supply. B12 is a necessary supplement to vegan and vegetarian diets because very low B12 intake can cause anemia and damage the nervous system. B12 is also critical for maintaining cardiovascular and prenatal health.

While these nutrients are important to human health, it is not necessary to obtain these nutrients from animals. For instance, microorganisms provide vitamin B12, whether it's in supplements or fortified foods. The only reliable vegan sources of B12 are foods fortified with B12 (including some nut, soy, hemp, oat milk, and soy products, and breakfast cereals) and B12 supplements.

To maintain a long-term vegan or vegetarian diet, there are a few things to keep in mind.

Supplementation Is Key for Energy and Longevity

As we have discussed, soil degradation is a problem, and many of the fruits and veggies of decades past carried more nutritional value than they do now. It would serve you well to take a multivitamin that includes a comprehensive array of vitamins, including vitamin D, B12or, better yet, a B complex vitaminmagnesium, iodine, and more.

As well as taking the correct amount of vitamins, especially B12, vegans and vegetarians need to follow these tips from the Mayo Clinic:

Consider an appointment with a registered dietician.

It can be difficult to transition from a meat-based to a vegetarian or vegan diet. Talk to a registered dietician if you have questions about nutrition or health.

Eat foods high in protein.

Eggs and dairy products such as yogurt and cottage cheese are fantastic vegetarian protein sources. Plant-based proteins can be found in legumes (beans, lentils, peas), seeds, and nuts. Discover meatless meals packed with protein. You should talk to your doctor about which protein sources are best for you if you have health conditions such as breast cancer or kidney disease.

Limit your carbohydrate intake.

It is possible to gain weight, experience blood sugar swings, and suffer from other health problems if you consume too many refined carbs. Make your meals healthier by choosing whole grains such as quinoa, brown rice, and oatmeal.

Get the calcium you need.

A person's calcium requirement is determined by age, gender, and genetics, especially in conditions like osteoporosis. Calcium is abundant in dairy products. Calcium can be found in veggies such as broccoli, kale, or chard if you're vegan. Calcium supplements containing vitamin D can also help you absorb calcium.

Choose foods fortified with vitamin D.

Vegans can choose foods fortified with vitamin D, including orange juice, cereal, and plant-based milks. Additionally, you can get vitamin D by safely exposing yourself to the sun.

Avoid foods high in sodium, sugar, and fat.

Plant-based meat substitutes can contain a lot of salt and be highly processed. Make sure you read the nutrition labels and look at the sodium, saturated fat, and added-sugar content. It's good for people with high blood pressure to keep sodium intake under 2,300 mg/day. Added sugar should not be consumed at more than nine teaspoons (36 g) per day for men and six teaspoons (25 g) per day for women, according to the American Heart Association. AHA recommends you eat only 5% saturated fat a day.

If you follow these tips over the course of your lifetime, then you will be able to maintain a healthy vegetarian or vegan diet. You'll be doing your body and the planet a favor.

About the Author

Robert Jennison has over 10 years of experience in the health and wellness space and is the founder of ActiveCare Nutrition. His involvement includes everything from product development and branding to digital strategy and quality assurance. ActiveCare Nutrition is an all-in-one, multifunctional supplement brand focusing on balanced health and nutrition, organically sourced ingredients, and functionality.

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